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PHILBY AND CIA

Albania Debacle Work of Red Spy

London Sunday Times News Service

LONDON Harold "Kim" Philby, the Soviet spy who penetrated the heart of the British Secret Intelligence Service, moved into a new job in Washington in October, 1949, and began the most destructive phase of his long career as a double agent.

Philby went to America as liaison man between the SIS and the American CIA. Now he was at the heart of Western intelligence—at a time when, as a top CIA man of the period said, "relations were closer than they have been between any two services at any time."

"You must remember," he said, "that at this time the CIA regarded themselves almost as novices."

Philby, considered Britain's most brilliant operative, had particular value to the CIA at this time. Being the Western expert on the subject, he virtually set up the CIA's anti-Soviet espionage operation.

THE DAMAGE Philby did during his two years in Washington is almost impossible to assess without access to secret information. But the London Sunday Times had pieced together the story of the worst disaster that was ultimately charged to Philby's account, the Albanian debacle.

What Philby betrayed in this affair was an attempt by Britain and America, at the height of the cold war, to overthrow Russian influence in Albania by uprisings.

For 17 years, this has remained one of the most extraordinary secrets of the cold war. It has suited both sides to leave it that way. For the West, the Albanian affair was a disaster costing 150 lives. For Russia it was a nasty preview of what could happen in other parts of her uneasy empire.

BY 1949, the weakest sector of the Russian empire was the Balkans. The Communist rebels in Greece were on the point of collapse. Yugoslavia was Communist but had broken with Russia.

Even Albania was unsteady. The Yugoslav Communists had run Albania since the war, but now Tito's cooling had forced Russia to move her own "technicians" and "advisers" into Albania.

At this point the British Foreign Office and the American State Department had the same idea: Could Albania nationalism be harnessed to overthrow Russian influence? And could the process of disaffection even be helped along a bit?

Ernest Bevin, the foreign secretary, was adamantly opposed to the idea. But he was persuaded to sanction a "pilot experiment" in subversion: A clandestine operation, to be organized jointly by the SIS and the CIA to infiltrate guerrilla bands into Albania to foment anti-Russian uprisings.

THE MAN responsible for coordinating the British and American halves of the joint operation was, naturally, the British liaison man in Washington, Kim Philby.

His experience as ex-controller of the Turkish station—the biggest and most active in that part of the world—made his advice on clandestine operations particularly valuable.

Certainly, the operation was well planned. One of the first steps was the formation around the summer of 1949 of a "Committee of Free Albanians," based in Italy and apparently a front organization for recruiting guerrillas.

The guerrillas were eventually ready to go. First in small groups, then in larger bands, they slipped up into the mountains and over the border into Albania.

It was a disaster.

WITHIN A month, 150 or so guerrillas—about half the total force—were either killed or captured, along with a number of Albanians who had been unwise enough to welcome the warriors.

The 150 survivors struggled back into Greece—to the embarrassment of the Greek government. The SIS in London had so hastily bully the bewildered home office into allowing 150 mysterious Albanians into Britain (where a weird "welcome back" party was thrown for them at the Caxton Hall in London).

It is unclear whether the home office was told the truth about these refugees—according to the source the Albanians were improbably described as "good friends of ours in Greece."

THE POST-MORTEM on the debacle was prolonged. After a year, opinion was still split. The Americans were uneasily convinced of treachery. And what new indications there were pointed to Philby, they thought.

But in Britain the SIS appeared not to have accepted even the evidence of treachery.

Knowing what is now known of Philby, it is clear that the Albanian expedition—and, indeed, many other aspects of the information flow between British and American intelligence — must have been leaked to the Russians.

The effect was totally to discredit in British eyes the policy of "positive intervention" in Communist Europe, and to weaken it for some years in America.